

# MEDIA GLOBALISATION: TOWARDS GREATER FREEDOM OR RESPONSIBILITY?

**Mohd Safar Hasim**

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi  
msafar@ukm.my

## **Abstract**

By and large, world press systems can be generally categorized as free, partially free, and not free. This categorization depended very much on the degree of freedom enjoyed in the countries concerned; whether the countries are under authoritarian or democratic rules. To be sure, changes that occurred in the political system of the countries concerned have great impact in the press systems of the countries. Over the last century, these changes occurred sporadically. However, over the last two decades or so, these changes are more frequent and widespread. Two concepts, ie. press and media council and freedom of information are being frequently used to address the issue of press freedom and responsibility. Parallel to these development, is the increasing appreciation of, albeit a small one, the responsibility of the press. This changing environment may be a precursor towards greater press freedom in the partially free press countries, and greater responsibility in the free press countries. Countries without a free press, presumably, will continue to be so. This paper will look at how this changing environment impact on the practice of democracy and also social and cultural values.

## **Abstrak**

Pada amnya, sistem akhbar dunia boleh dikategorikan sebagai bebas, separuh bebas dan tidak bebas. Pengkategorian ini bergantung kepada kebebasan yang dinikmati oleh negara-negara berkaitan; sama ada negara-negara berkenaan di bawah pemerintahan autoritarian atau demokrasi. Jelasnya, perubahan yang berlaku dalam sistem politik negara-negara berkenaan mempunyai dampak besar dalam sistem akhbar negara-negara berkenaan. Sejak satu abad lalu, perubahan ini berlaku secara tidak menentu. Bagaimanapun, dalam masa dua atau tiga dekad lalu, perubahan-perubahan ini berlaku secara lebih kerap dan meluas. Dua konsep, iaitu majlis akhbar dan media, dan kebebasan maklumat, sering digunakan dengan lebih kerap untuk mengangani isu kebebasan akhbar dan tanggungjawab akhbar. Selari dengan perkembangan ini, ialah pengahayatan yang bertambah, walaupun masih kecil, mengenai tanggungjawab akhbar. Persekitaran yang berubah ini mungkin menjadi permulaan kepada kebebasan akhbar yang lebih dalam negara-negara yang separuh bebas dan lebih kebertanggungjawaban dalam negara-negara yang mengamalkan kebebasan akhbar. Negara-

negara yang tidak bebas akhbaranya, besar kemungkinan akan berterusan demikian. Kertas ini akan melihat bagaimana persekitaran yang berubah ini memberi impak kepada amalan demokrasi dan juga nilai sosial dan budaya.

Keywords: Press council, freedom of information, web blogging, media amership

### **Freedom with Responsibility**

Although it is assumed that press freedom is good, its implementation can bring problem to some countries. For the countries practicing liberal press system, it is contrary to liberal principles to use laws controlling the press. Because of that, efforts are made to ensure some responsibility in the press through code of ethics. Over the last several decades, efforts to achieve greater responsibility of the press are made through the setting up of press councils, the Hutchins study and report, and the McBride Commission report.

### **Press Council**

The setting up of press council is a manifestation that presses should be controlled, to make it more responsible. Under the press freedom concept, government can't control the press, such as licensing laws or censorship, but self-regulation by the press is acceptable. Early press councils were set up based on this principle. But now, press councils are to be found in countries where the presses are controlled by laws.

The first Press Council in the world was established in Sweden in 1916, one of the countries practicing press freedom. Three groups were involved in the setting up of Swedish Press Council, i.e. the Publishing Clubs, Sweden Newspapers Association and journalists union. Their objective was receiving public complaints about the press acting excessively. In the early stage, the council was not so successful but now its activities are well-received. Newspapers, radios and televisions in Sweden are free under the Swedish Freedom of the Press Act and the country's constitution in relation to freedom of speech. This Press Council carry out its duty based on a code of ethics for newspapers, radios and televisions.

Britain, a country practicing press freedom, was the second country to establish a Press Council in 1947. After that, many other countries followed suit to establish press council, including the United States in 1973. The National Press Council of the United States lasted only 10 years because it was not acceptable by the American press. Although the US did not have a national press council, Minnesota has set up a state level press council. Until 2002,



some 66 press or media councils were established all over the world, almost all at the national level and others at the provincial level (Mohd Safar2004a). Part of these press councils are members of World Association of Press-Media Council (WAPC) with headquarters in Kuala Lumpur.

Malaysia has been toying with the idea of establishing up a press council. Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak, in 1974 suggested that a Malaysia should have a press council. Nothing much came out of that suggestion although a committee comprising leading press personalities was formed. In 1989, a Malaysian Code of Ethics for Journalists, prepared by the Malaysian Press Institute, was launched. The initiative to establish Press Council became alive again after a memorandum signed by 581 journalists was submitted to the Deputy Prime Minister, YAB Dato Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi on 3<sup>rd</sup> may 1999. YAB Dato Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was then also the Home Affairs Minister, whose portfolio covers publication and the press. The memorandum urged the government to repeal the Printing Presses and Publication Act 1984 and mentioned possibility of establishing an independent body responsible for the press.

The government asked the Malaysian Press Institute (MPI), a body representing the press, to study the possibility of establishing a press council. MPI recommended a statutory media council through parliament based on the Indian Model. The report did not address the repeal of the Printing Presses and Publication Act 1984. Journalists, through the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) rejected the MPI report and recommendation as they felt they were not adequately consulted. The journalists also did not agree that the press council be set up through parliament.

After the Malaysian Human Right Commission (SUHAKAM) was formed, a group of journalists presented their complaints to SUHAKAM about press freedom in the country. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2002, a group of journalists presented a memorandum to SUHAKAM urging the human rights commission to take action with regards to laws controlling the press in the country. They also mentioned they did not agree with the press council suggested by MPI.

Following that SUHAKAM organized a workshop about press freedom on 1<sup>st</sup> August 2002. The workshop suggested a press council free from the government be set up. The workshop also suggested that the government must repeal certain sections in laws pertaining to the press. These laws include licensing and publishing permit, and right of appeal to the courts as a results of actions by Government, all of these are in Printing Presses and Publication Act 1984. This workshop also urged the Government to repeal the one year minimum jail term is convicted under the Official Secrets Act 1972. It also urged that judicial review be restored to courts especially in relation to Printing Presses and Publications Act (SUHAKAM 2003).

As a follow up, a workshop was held on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2004. This workshop was attended by media owners, editors, journalists, academics and civil groups. As a result, they agreed to form a committee to study the possibility of establishing an independent press council and propose a new code of ethics based on the MPI code. The workshop was seen as a turning point in the development of the press in Malaysia and its contribution towards achieving Vision 2020 (Mohd Safar 2004a).

Action should be taken from now to create a free press with responsibility in the country. This can not be done all at once, it should step by step. As we know, Malaysia is a country where the laws controlling the press is something common and have been there for a long time. So it is not easy to unravel it. The effect of changing the laws should be thought out and at this time nobody could expect what would happen. However, the finer points in the proposed Malaysian Media Council and views expressed the SUHAKAM workshops should be utilized.

Although there are those who considered the proposed Malaysian Media Council was still-born, it actually attracted many interested parties, especially editors. Another thing, the understanding of expected changes is still low among interested parties. This understanding will take time. The change-over can not be done overnight.

### **The Hutchins Commission**

The Hutchins Commission was established in 1942 by Henry Luce, the owner of Times Publications in the United States. The members of this commission were very eminent people in academia and media. Its chairman, Robert M. Hutchins was the Chancellor of the University of Chicago. The main purpose of establishing the Commission was to study the problems and provide suggestions on how to improve the press institution in America. As a result of the studies the report of which was completed in 1947, the commission suggested that American newspaper should be more responsible. This suggestion came to be known as Social Responsibility Theory of the Press.

Criticisms on the techniques and practice of the American press attracted a very prominent attention in the commissions' report (Altschull 1990, 263). While expressing support for the First Amendment of the American Constitution, the commission decried sensationalism, meaningless reporting, distortion and perpetuation of misunderstanding. It wanted the press to fulfill five basic services; the day's news must should be comprehensive and accurate; a forum to exchange comments; a way of exchanging ideas and clarify vision and value of the society and the way to reach one another.



According to Altschull (1990, 283), the most lasting demand of the commission was the press should not only present facts in a meaningful context, but to expose truth about the facts, in this way the press would be responsible and accountable to the American people.

Merrill et. al (2001, 93) quoted Hutchins Commission as saying, "the press should be more accountable to the public in order to fulfill the requirements and protect the rights of the public and the rights of those who do not own a press." The press realize that their weakness and errors were no longer a private matter and could be a danger to the people. The voice of the press, in moving towards monopoly will become exclusive from the perspective of wisdom and observations, and in this way deny other voices representation and contribution from the public. In future, press freedom can continue as a freedom with responsibility.

The Hutchins Commission started the Social Responsibility Theory of the Press, which grew in 1950's and 1960's, later became a communitarian movement and public journalism (Merrill 2001, 93)

### **McBride's Commission**

UNESCO carried out a study under Sean McBride to achieve a fairer and efficient information and communication order in the world (McBride 1980). This move by UNESCO created a big controversy in UNESCO. M'Bow, its Director General. Mahtar M'Bow, from Senegal, was all out for free and balance flow with the catch phrase of New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). The then Director General of UNESCO, Amadou Mahtar M'Bow says The demand for freedom – democratization of information all over the world — is at the core of UNESCO's approach to communication. UNESCO's effort in urging for more news sources and its hope that a variety of different opinion is expressed and published, is actually to meet objective of greater freedom for all (M'Bow, 1982).

Under this approach, UNESCO also wanted to see freedom of information is used in major ethical principles such as peace, justice, friendship and development all important for social harmony throughout the world. M'Bow quoted John Jay Whitney, International Herald Tribune Chairman as saying:

"Freedom is important to the responsible press. And responsibility... is an obligation that can not be avoided by the free press."

What UNESCO wanted to do was a more balanced flow between developed and developing countries, and more positive news used because Western media are prone to use negative news

of developing countries. UNESCO suggested several actions that should be taken to correct this situation. The West saw this as a challenge to free flow and US media led the protests. US and UK had quit UNESCO because it seem that this action is opposite to press freedom (Abrams 1982).

Although developing nations' fight was not successful, it had opened up many eyes. Now certain editors in the US questioned the concept of news which stressed on the exceptional, and negative because these distort reality what the society see (Merrill, et. Al 2001).

### **Impact of the Global Change on Malaysia**

The future of press freedom depends very much on the digital revolution, although it is still not clear what social impact it will have (Gunaratne 2001). McLuhan and Powers (1989) in *The Global Village* predicted that technologies will change the future's scenario. This change will certainly involve the press and media. The change will focus on four aspects: the change in technologies, change in media ownership, community's change and change in the contents and concepts of news.

### **Change in Technological Drive**

The most significant change is expected to be connected with ICT, i.e. digitalization. The growth of digitalization, has shown that would be redundant in the future. Countries that control the press through licensing could not do so to the Internet.

It is not only hard to control but it has been a policy not to control because of business consideration (Communication and Multimedia Act, 1998). This will create a conflict of law situation, where there are laws in the conventional world and none in the cyber world. For instance in Malaysia, under the Bill of Guarantee, the government ensures that the Internet will not be censored. This situation may no be obvious now as Internet is not widely used now. However, when Internet is widely used this conflict will become obvious and will have impact on laws in the conventional world.

Wider usage of internet could give rise to two effects. First, if the controlled media continue with their old style of publishing, i.e. continue publishing only news what editor feel the people should read or become a propaganda tool, readers will most likely shift to Internet which is free to report what readers what to read. If this happens, circulation of newspapers will decline. Secondly, in countries practicing control of the press through laws licensing there will greater pressure for the laws to be repeal. Or could the [press become freer without the need to abolish the laws?



The number of newspaper readers in this country which is 4.2 million, is low compared to the population who can read, which is more than 10 million. Where did they get their information? Radio, TV, online newspaper like *Malaysiakini* or *Harakah Daily*? While the *Harakah* newspaper, published twice a month has a circulation of more than 200,000 per issue. Taking all these into considerations, there are still a large number of Malaysians that are potential newspaper readers. A study which I did over the last ten years show circulation of most newspapers declined (Mohd Safar, 2003). Taking into consideration the population of this country who can read, there are still about 6 million people who are not reading newspapers. Why are they not reading newspapers? The large number of people reading *Harakah* shows that people want a different kind of information. Available newspapers in the country do not give the variety being sought in opinion and reports. One way is to set up an independent newspaper. This newspaper should use a different approach from the present mainstream newspaper. It must be a newspaper with no political connection, and not bias in its reports. It must not follow current reporting style; it should provide a balanced reporting. This will to the need of people currently not reading any newspapers at all.

Internet has created a new phenomena of change all over the world. In America, for example, readers and television viewers have begun deserting print and electronic media following what is described as an epochal transformation. Epochal transformation means a big change occurred because of change in power structure. Scholars refer to three communication revolutions in human history giving a big social impact, namely writing as a first revolution, printing as a second revolution, and convergence of telecommunication, computer and digitalization as third revolution (Gunaratne 2001; Setenson 1994). A big change occurs in the power structure of society after each revolution. Writing revolution has dismantled the monopoly of old people who wanted to cling on to oral tradition. Printing revolution put an end to the monopoly of information by the church and mandarin, depending their social context (Gunaratne 2001). Is it possible that the loss of readers and television viewers are part of this phenomenon?

Apart from that, the decline in the number of readers can also be attributed to lack of interest and loss of people's confidence of the media and people moving to Internet newspapers. The loss of readers in Malaysia could possibly be attributed to the same reasons. People read alternative newspapers in the Internet because they want alternative information. For these newspapers, the solution perhaps lie in providing a more balanced news if they want to attract back the readers.

The Internet has spawn a new kind of journalism, blogging. Thousands of web blogging have mushroomed all over the world. In Malaysia alone, there are hundreds of them, however only a few are well-known. The most well-known in Malaysia is Jeff Ooi's Screenshots, an award-winning blog. Basically, bloggers will put up news stories and they invite readers to give comment on the news. Participants in web blogging not only comment on the news but also comments on comments made. This interactive mode is becoming popular judging by the number of blogs being set up. Even Reporters Sans Frontiers (RSF) a body well-known for compiling press freedom index in the world, has created a directory of web blogging in the world. Web blogging has created a space where people can express their opinion freely, something missing from the conventional press. Although web blogging are moderated, they are not controlled except for seditious comments. But even bloggers are conscious about social responsibility, at some of the sites that I visited. At this stage, blogging is very much an individual effort and may die off if the person handling the blogs retired or die. For, example, somebody inside Iraq started a blog giving current information about situation in Baghdad just before the US-led forces overran the city. However, in the confusion that follows the blog went of the Internet. The challenge to blogging is whether this model is sustainable and whether blogging can be developed from merely a one-person show.

### **Changes in Press and Media Ownership**

Once upon a time, anybody interested to be a newspaper publisher may do so without difficulty because the cost is relatively small. Those who have seen TV series "Peyton Place" may notice that the editor is also the publisher, and reporter all in one. However, as the industry grows, newspaper firms have become very big and a large investment will be required to set even a medium size company. The main barrier to entry is now capital. Printing and newspaper technology is now very sophisticated. At the same time there are mergers among newspaper companies, and other media companies, forming media conglomerates. At the international level, there are now global media companies with world-wide coverage. Newspapers and magazines are now published simultaneously in many places all over the world. Examples are Time, Newsweek, Readers' Digest for magazines and International Herald Tribune and Asian Wall Street Journals for newspapers. One good example of a major publisher is Rupert Murdoch, who not only own a chain of newspapers in the United States, but also in Britain and Australia. He also own satellite TV with world-wide coverage.

The change in ownership form has impact on the setting up of new companies. These conglomerates are very business-oriented, as



a result public opinion receives less and less attention. Because new newspaper companies are hard to set up, and existing companies come together to become conglomerates, freedom of expression may be marginalized. As a result, there will be demands from the public led by the NGOs to be given space and voice in the press to express their views.

### **The Development of Civil Society**

NGOs, domestic and international, are active all over the world championing their ideals (Keane 2004). Some of these NGOs are being supported by foundations such as Open Society. The foundation headed by George Soros provides financial support bodies fighting for democracy in countries considered not democratic. Open Society also provides financial support to those bodies fighting for freedom of the press. Other than that, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) support financially activities related to media including freedom of the press.

International agencies like UNESCO are also involved in promoting the development press freedom all over the world, especially in countries seen as controlling the press. On May 3 every year, UNESCO in cooperation with local journalists body organize activities to create awareness of press freedom.

### **The Development of the Concept of Communitarian and Public Journalism**

Merrill et al. (2001) in his book *Twilight of Press Freedom* says press freedom in the US is declining. Present development, he says is moving towards the communitarian concept of journalism, as seen in the growth of public journalism.

Public journalism covers three things, first the actual duty of the press; secondly, as a set of practice now spreading in America; and thirdly, as a public and institutional movement (Merrill et. Al, 2001). Public Journalism tries to provide ways to solve community's problem meaningfully for the public. Public Journalism comes about because of Hutchins Commission which gives impact to journalism thinking and provides the basis of social awareness so press responsibility will grow (Merrill et. Al. 2001).

This wind of change is blowing especially in America. Even though liberal theory is still widely practiced, there are public journalism movement and practice. Briefly, public journalism emphasized press responsibility. As Merrill pointed out, the movement from press libertarian to press responsibility has started. This means that the old libertarian paradigm based on European Enlightenment is setting, even though it is still dominant in the West (Merrill, 2001).

Indeed, development journalism and public journalism have similarities in from the responsibility aspect (Gunaratne & Mohd Safar 1997). Development journalism itself which started in 1960s is an effort to make coverage of development news more meaningful and can be appreciated by readers in developing countries. However, Gunaratne and Mohd Safar quoted Aggarwala as saying the development journalism concept has been misinterpreted by American academics who equate development oriented news as news controlled by the government.

### Conclusion

This paper has looked at various changes taking place all over the world and the impact that could happen to the media scene. Changes mentioned above, would likely have some impact on press freedom, whether by choice or not. This impact can be happen in two directions. For countries where control is the norm, most likely there will be some relaxation in control and if this happens it will make press freedom freer in those countries. On the other hand, countries where there is press freedom, most likely the change would be towards more responsibility.

### References

- Altschull, J.H. (1995). *Agents of Power: the media and public policy*. New York: Longman.
- Gunaratne, S. & Hasim M.S. (1996). Social responsibility theory revisited: A comparative study of public journalism and development journalism. In *Javnost (The Public)* III(3).
- Keane, J. (2003). *Global civil society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lent, J. & Vilanilam J. V. (1979). *The use of development news*. Singapore: AMIC.
- M'Bow, Amadou-Mahtar. (1982). *UNESCO's objective is to assure greater freedom for all. The media crisis: A continuing challenge*. Washington: World Press Freedom Committee.
- MacBride, S. (1980). *Many Voices, One World*. London: Kagen Page.
- Merrill, J. C., Gade, P.J. & Blevens, F.R. (2001). *Twilight of press freedom, the rise of people's journalism*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Hasim, M. S. (2003). Circulation of Malaysian newspapers: A decade of mized fortune. *Jurnal Komunikasi*, 19.
- Hasim, M. S. & Merican, A. M. (2003). A Council Under Construction. In *Watching the Watchdog, Media Self Regulations in Southeast Asia*. Bangkok: Southeast Asian Press Alliance & Friedrich Edert Stiftung.
- Hasim, M. S. (2004, 8 January 2004). *Formation of a media council, freedom with responsibility*. Paper presented at the Consultation on the Formation on Media Council, Suhakam.



- New Straits Times. (2004). Some media restrictions still necessary. 8 May, p. 3.
- New Straits Times. (2004). Musa Urges government to review Restrictions Imposed on media. 7 May, p. 9.
- New Straits Times. (2004). Repeal Archaic Laws curtailing press freedom. 7 May, p. 15.